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Kathleen Adams and William Baker
ALFRED AUSTIN AND GEORGE ELIOT:
Two Unpublished Letters

Today, Alfred Lord Tennyson's successor as the Poet Laureate, Alfred Austin (1835-1913), is a largely forgotten literary name from the late Victorian and Edwardian worlds of yesteryear. Austin's connection with George Eliot and G. H. Lewes will not be found documented in G. S. Haight's nine volume edition of *The George Eliot Letters* (New Haven, 1954-78) and his name does not appear in its index. *The Autobiography of Alfred Austin Poet Laureate 1835-1910* (2 vols., 1911: reprinted AMS Press, New York, 1973) does refer to meetings between George Eliot, George Henry Lewes and Alfred Austin. G. H. Lewes the editor of the *Fortnightly Review* published Austin's 'Notes Curious and Critical made at Perugia', November 1866, pp. 666-81.

In his *Autobiography* Austin writes:

Not until several years later did I meet him, and George Eliot, at dinner at Lord and Lady Wolseley's, when they were living in Portman Square, and I was assigned the honour of taking down the authoress of *Adam Bede*, and Lewes was assigned to my wife. I remember the first thing she said to me, as we sate down, with her extraordinarily soft sweet voice, as she looked across the table, 'An ideal poet's wife'; and, during the rest of dinner, I had the pleasure of her conversation. But not to anticipate further the years yet to come, I remember that, encouraged by Lewes's kind note about the Perugia paper, I sent him the following sonnet, which likewise he accepted with another generous acknowledgment, adding that it had given much pleasure to his wife; in some measure, no doubt, because it expressed the 'Meliorism' which, midway between Pessimism and Optimism, represented her theory of the march and destiny of mankind:

Because I failed, shall I asperse the End
With scorn or doubt, my failure to excuse;
'Gainst arduous Truth my feeble falseness use,
Like that worst foe, a vain splenetic friend?
Deem'st thou, self-amorous fool, the High will bend
If that thy utmost stature prove too small?
Though thou be dwarf, some other is more tall.
The End is fixed; have faith; the means will mend,
Failures but carve a pathway to success;
Our force is many, so our aim be one:
The foremost drop; on, those behind must press.
What boots my doing, so the deed be done?
Let my poor body lie beneath the breach:
I clomb and fell; who stand on me will reach. (I, 205-206)

Two letters now in the possession of Kathleen Adams provide a testimony to the cordiality between Eliot and the future poet Laureate. The first is written in purple ink on headed note paper, watermarked (in an elaborate pattern with the crown above an oval border and a figure reminiscent of Boudecia) and an envelope addressed to 'Alfred Austin Esq., Swinford House, Ashford Kent'. The letter belongs to the period before G.H. Lewes's 30 November 1878 death, when George Eliot and he retreated to the peace and quiet of their house at Witley, near Godalming, where they stayed from 21 June until 11 November.

The Priory
North Bank
Regents Park
June 1. 78

[Headed Stationery]

Dear Mr Austin:

We expect to go 'into retreat' (in our country home) next week, & to stay among the peaceful fields & commons till the end of autumn. After that we shall be in this corner again & shall be happy to see you & Mrs Austin in your visits to London when they happen to include a Sunday. That is our day for receiving friends, between half past two & six o'clock.

With best regards to Mrs Austin, I am

Yours sincerely
M E Lewes

The second letter belongs to the period following G. H. Lewes's death and before George Eliot's own 6 May 1880 marriage to John Walter Cross. The letter is written on mourning black-edged paper on headed stationery watermarked "JOYNSON (FIRST QUALITY)", addressed to "Alfred Austin Esq., Junior Carlton Club, W" and postmarked 'St. John's Wood, Jan. 16/80/N.W.' George Eliot writes:

The Priory
North Bank
Regent's Park

Dear Mr Austin

I am always at home at 4:30, & shall be glad to see you or Mrs Austin whenever you happen to be in London.

Yours very truly,
M. E. Lewes

Alfred Austin Esq

1. We would like to thank Jonathan G. Ouvry, copyright holder on all unpublished George Eliot - George Henry Lewes letters, for his permission to publish these letters. We must also thank Bill Adams, Graham Handley, Beryl Gray and Tonny van den Broek for their interesting observations on the delightful afternoon of 16 October 1993 in the Adams's drawing room on Alfred Austin, and George Eliot!